

17 March 1965

Dear Mr. Vice President:

I wish to thank you for sending me a most interesting account of your conversation of 12 March with Ambassador Dobrynin. I have made this available to a very small number of my senior staff officials who are concerned with this delicate problem.

We are looking forward to greeting you and the members of your staff when you visit our Headquarters on 24 March. At that time, we can agree on arrangements for keeping you advised of our production and activities through Mr. Connell [redacted]

[redacted] and my staff and I look forward to doing business with him on a regular basis.

Sincerely,

/s/ JOHN

John A. McCone
Director

The Vice President
United States Senate
Washington, D. C.

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THE VICE PRESIDENT

WASHINGTON

March 9, 1965

Dear John:

[redacted], is now assisting me in the field of national security affairs. Please use him in every way you deem appropriate to keep me informed of your production and activities.

Special, weekly and periodic reports should be addressed in his care to the Office of the Vice President, Room 176, Executive Office Building.

[redacted]

May I again express to you, John, and to your staff, my sincere regret that pressing business forced the postponement of our meeting this afternoon.

Sincerely,

Hubert H. Humphrey
Hubert H. Humphrey

Honorable John McCone
Director
Central Intelligence Agency
Washington, D. C.

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March 15, 1965

Memorandum

For: The President

From: The Vice President

Subject: Conversation with Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin, Soviet Embassy, March 12, 1965

Tonight Mrs. Humphrey and I dined alone and informally with Soviet Ambassador and Mrs. Dobrynin, finally accepting an invitation that had been scheduled and cancelled several times during the last few months.

Dobrynin had a question to put which he repeated several times: "How much importance does the United States give to its relations with the Soviet Union?" "Do you consider relations with the USSR to be of high priority? Of highest priority?"

Dobrynin professed puzzlement by U.S. air strikes against North Vietnam. He reviewed briefly US-USSR relations during the Johnson Administration. When President Johnson assumed the Presidency his policy toward the USSR was unknown. Gradually the Soviet Union had come to respect him as a supporter of the Test Ban Treaty, of non-proliferation of weapons and the voluntary cutback in the production of fissionable materials. The Ambassador said the Soviet people had developed a sympathy for the President, partly because the Soviet press had given broad coverage to the President's positive steps for peace.

But, said Dobrynin, why did the United States bomb Hanoi while our new Premier was there? Before his visit we were not committed to heavy support of North Vietnam but we were now. We thought the President was a man concerned about relations with the Soviet Union -- that he had put them at the top of his list. When the President defeated Goldwater we looked forward to better relations. But we can't understand why you are testing us now. We are in a quandary. Don't you think your relations with the USSR are of high priority? If you do, then why do you bomb North Vietnam? Why do you test us?

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Or, asked the Ambassador, is it because you base your policy on Soviet-Chinese differences and you don't think we'll aid Hanoi? If so, you're wrong. Why do you do this? Our relations, continued Dobrynin, seemed to have improved. What's gone wrong? The President had said he might come to Russia and he wanted our leaders to come here.

I try to cable the truth to Moscow, including things the Foreign Office doesn't like. I say the good things when I think they're good. I try to tell the truth. But why are you testing us now? Don't you understand as a Socialist State we are morally and ideologically bound to come to the assistance of a sister Socialist State? We can't be a leader and stand by and ignore the bombing of the North Vietnamese.

Is it because your policy is based on Soviet-Sino differences, he asked. Those differences are real. But you are pushing us together. You will force us to admit there can't be peaceful co-existence. If you continue to bomb and aggress against North Vietnam, we lose the argument. You're forcing us to agree with the Chinese who say to us, "Look at that brutal bombing! And you speak of peaceful co-existence?"

Dobrynin here returned to US-USSR relations. We don't want to admit we're wrong, he said. But I can't understand why you bombed when Premier Kosygin was there. I can't understand what your government was thinking of. Do you care about your relations with the Soviet Union? The fact that you bombed while our new Premier was present leads us to the opinion that you don't care, or is it because you're trying to confront us? Can you imagine the USSR bombing another country being visited by President Johnson? If we wanted to confront you, then perhaps. But for any other reason? Kosygin is a new Premier; do you seek to embarrass him?

At this point I said, you know the President used every means at his disposal to prevent embarrassment to Kosygin. He ordered US Military to take no provocative actions and to use all influence possible to dissuade South Vietnamese counterparts from taking any actions that might embarrass your Premier.

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We were of the opinion that it was Peking and Hanoi who sought to embarrass not only Prime Minister Kosygin but also President Johnson. They tried to embarrass us both.

Dobrynin said that surely the United States did not think the Soviet Union so stupid as not to have understood what was going on in Hanoi. But if your government had only said to us, "There's been an attack on our men and material at Pleiku and Camp Holloway. We know Kosygin is in Hanoi. We feel we must retaliate. But out of respect for Kosygin, we won't do it when he is there." What did the United States have to lose?, he asked. North Vietnam had no air force; the United States could strike North Vietnam at any time against little opposition.

We understood what they were doing, the Ambassador continued. Why didn't you credit our intelligence? Up until that incident on February 7, Kosygin was not committed to North Vietnam. He was new and his government was new. There are always uncertainties with new governments. And then your action caused great concern back in Moscow. When the Soviet people read that 150 bombers took off in Saigon and bombed North Vietnam they remembered that only 5 or 10 Luftwaffe bombers wiped out or burned whole villages. When they heard about 150 American bombers, what were they to think? The people asked what's happened? What were we doing to make the Americans stop?

Then Dobrynin said that the Soviet Union had understood the vital interests of the United States. The Soviet Union respected them. It respected the power of the United States. But by bombing North Vietnam the United States might force a confrontation that could grow more serious and painful every day.

Then I replied. I drew from my pocket the statement of the President on August 10, 1964. I read that statement carefully to Ambassador Dobrynin. I made it clear that President Johnson's policy and Congress' policy were one. The policy of the United States was published to the world and understood by the entire world. Surely it was understood by the Soviet Union before the trip by Prime Minister Kosygin to Hanoi and to Pyongyang. I said we considered relations with the USSR to be very important. Every decision the President makes is made in the light of these relations. The Soviet Union knows we have a commitment to defend South Vietnam. We intend to keep that commitment.

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President Johnson refrained for a long time, I continued, from responding to attacks upon Americans in South Vietnam. There had been an attack upon Americans during Christmas. President Johnson refrained from responding to that attack for two reasons: he did not want to accelerate the struggle; he hoped it was only an isolated incident and not a broad pattern.

Then I cited the White Paper which indicated the seriousness of the infiltration of men and arms across the border into South Vietnam. (Dobrynin did not then, or later, seek to deny Hanoi's command and direction of the war.)

Dobrynin agreed for the moment to assume the correctness of the facts of the White Paper. But even if there are 30,000 North Vietnamese infiltrators, that number is still only about the same as your 24,000 U.S. soldiers. Further, it's obvious you've put much more military material into South Vietnam than has Hanoi, he said. But the war continues. Therefore, there would be a civil war whether North Vietnam were engaged or not. The Vietnamese do not want the regimes of Saigon. It is the view of the Soviet Union that South Vietnam, if left free to make a choice, would become Communist, sooner or later.

For a considerable period of time, Dobrynin said, the USSR had not been disinterested in an international conference. It had not closed the door on United Kingdom or French initiatives. "But we're not interested anymore," he said.

I said we had reliable information that Hanoi boasted it was going to win anyhow and saw no reason to go to a conference. I considered that talk a threat to peace.

I said I wanted to direct his attention again to what President Johnson has said. We had no great desire to have our boys killed anywhere in the world, but the North Vietnamese must leave South Vietnam alone. If what you say is true, it is a civil war that is going to end in a victory for Communism anyhow -- what do you risk by insisting that North Vietnam cease and desist its infiltration of men and supplies into South Vietnam? Why does not the USSR, acting in its capacity as Co-Chairman of the Conference

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that set up the Geneva Agreements, take some initiative, exercise its leadership, and persuade North Vietnam to stop? What have you got to lose? You say your sister State is going to win anyway, what can you lose? Use your influence, and you have influence, and demand that Hanoi stop its command, direction, and above all, infiltration. If infiltrations stop, and it can be verified, then there is something accomplished. At least there would be a step toward conditions for a peaceful settlement.

You know, responded Dobrynin, you can't police a jungle border.

I know you can't be absolutely sure every rifle has stopped coming across, I partially agreed, but if you really put the pressure on Hanoi, it would stop.

Dobrynin said the United States could not expect that while its bombings were going on.

I said that North Vietnam should be willing to respect its agreements. The first Geneva Accord was now eleven years old. We are not going to stop our bombing while North Vietnam continues to ignore its agreements. If North Vietnam gave any indication by positive action, particularly by cessation of its flow of subversives and arms into South Vietnam, we then might have the beginning of possibilities for diplomacy. If we could see twenty years ahead we would hope that US-USSR were working together more closely. The most dangerous threat today was not between the world's largest powers but from skirmishes between smaller States which might back powerful Allies into a corner. The situation today was somewhat like 1914.

Dobrynin said that we were much more mature now. We had learned a lot. He didn't think we would let 1914 happen again.

There were some differences now between 1914 and 1965 I agreed, but small powers seemed to get larger Allies into interesting positions.

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Why don't you keep in mind, Dobrynin asked, the vital interests of the US and USSR? Surely the United States understood that the USSR knew there were certain things it must never do when it came down to the vital interests of the U.S. And surely the U.S. knew the USSR could not back away from a Socialist country. If it did, the whole Communist camp would say the USSR was weak -- that the USSR put United States interests above those of the Socialist system.

I then pressed him hard. He must understand the United States is a major power. It was sensitive about being attacked by others. Our people would accuse us of having no courage if we didn't respond to illegal and outrageous attacks upon American soldiers and airmen. What else could the Soviet Union expect us to do after this long line of bloody incidents? You recognize we are in South Vietnam. We are committed to its defense. South Vietnam is being attacked by North Vietnam. The Viet Cong are agitators, terrorists, subversives, infiltrated, directed and commanded by Hanoi. They might not have crossed the border in a formation of ten divisions in the old fashioned way, but they have crossed and they have aggressed. Perhaps the United States still had something to learn about what you call ward of national liberation, but we are learning. We will win the war in Vietnam. We all know there have been certain instabilities in South Vietnam, but the margin of the difference between its stability and instability is the infiltration by North Vietnam. That infiltration must cease.

Dobrynin said he knew the U.S. was a major power. "Why don't you believe we know you're strong," he said. "We know what you can do. We know you could probably destroy us. You have massive strength. Whatever you do, you do as a very strong state."

I said that he might say that. But Hanoi seems to see nothing of the sort. They call upon us to get up and to go home. We are not going to get up and go anywhere as long as Hanoi continues its aggression against South Vietnam.

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Dobrynin said he knew the United States did not want to negotiate. Right now the USSR did not want an international conference. That was the declared position. But there were other ways, he mused. During the Cuban confrontation, his house had been used for various things, not for negotiations, but for things that have been instrumental in getting a settlement. There were many other ways.

I asked him to assume that North Vietnam and the United States were locked together; tied down on a track from which they could not get loose. According to Dobrynin, this situation had led to trouble. Now shouldn't the USSR exercise some initiative in this situation? Wasn't the USSR concerned about its relation with the United States? If our relations were of the highest priority, should not the USSR use its strong position in the Communist camp and persuade the North Vietnamese to cease and desist forthwith?